

MEXICO CITY MINISTERIAL DECLARATION -“EDUCATING TO PREVENT”

Addressing Homophobia in Schools: How Key Stakeholders Can Ensure Safe and Inclusive Schools

The Mexico City Ministerial Declaration “Educating to Prevent,” is a strategic tool to strengthen HIV-prevention efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) by ensuring access to quality, comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services. Moreover, the Declaration also seeks to foster equity among all people and to combat discrimination, including discrimination based on an individual’s HIV status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

...We, the Ministers of Health and Education of Latin America and the Caribbean ...Recognize the responsibility of the State to promote human development, including education and health, as well as to implement effective strategies to educate and protect children, adolescents and youth from infection, and to combat all forms of discrimination.

-PREAMBLE, MEXICO CITY MINISTERIAL DECLARATION
“EDUCATING TO PREVENT”

Homophobic Bullying in Schools

Homophobia is a form of violence, hatred, hostility and discrimination toward persons who engage in sexual relations with, or feel an attraction to, persons of the same sex. Even individuals who are perceived to have a same-sex attraction or may not conform to social norms of masculinity and femininity can be targeted. In Latin America and the Caribbean, as in many other regions, homophobic bullying is particularly prevalent in school environments. It emerges from misinformation, discrimination and prejudice and fosters an unsafe environment for students and educators alike.

Homophobic bullying in schools can take many forms including verbal abuse, such as name-calling, spreading rumors and verbal threats and intimidation as well as physical abuse or sexual assault. Such physical, sexual and emotional abuse results in harmful mental health outcomes and reinforces social and structural inequalities. Several studies have documented the effects of bullying, which can include lack of sleep, loss of appetite, isolation, nervousness, being upset or angry, elevated rates of actual and attempted suicide and self-harm, absenteeism, truancy and limited achievement at school.

Schools: Creating Safe, Healthy and Inclusive Spaces

The Ministerial Declaration “Educating to Prevent” outlines the commitment “to guarantee the rights to health and other related human rights ...in particular access to quality education for all children, adolescents and youth in our countries in an environment free from violence, stigma and discrimination.” Young people of diverse backgrounds and experiences come together in schools. In recognition of this diversity, we must actively foster equity and understanding among diverse sexes, sexual orientations, gender identities, age groups, and socioeconomic and cultural groups. Safe schools embody the values of pluralism and democracy, where the rights of each individual are respected. An inclusive and nondiscriminatory environment serves not only short-term goals for the safety and well-being of the members of the schools community, but also seeks to remedy underlying inequalities in society at large. The Ministerial Declaration acknowledged that “unequal relationships between the sexes and among age groups, socioeconomic and cultural differences, and diversity in sexual orientation and identities, when associated with risk factors, create situations of increased vulnerability to HIV/STI infection.”

“It is imperative to develop a supportive environment where all people are treated with dignity and respect. All citizens are part of society regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity...”

-REBECCA GRYNSPAN,
ASSOCIATE ADMINISTRATOR
UNITED NATIONS
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
(UNDP)

Methodologies to Foster Safe Schools and Combat Homophobic Bullying and Harassment

Changing the underlying values and attitudes which enable homophobia to exist in school environments requires the participation of parents, educators, school administrators, students, policy makers and other key stakeholders. The following examples illustrate effective interventions to assure safe, inclusive schools and respond to instances of homophobic bullying when it emerges:

TRAINING FOR EDUCATORS

Widespread acceptance of homophobic attitudes and behaviors can mean that educators often condone the bullying and harassment perpetuated by others, or may even be the ones carrying it out. Educators may not be equipped with the knowledge and skills to diffuse bullying and discrimination, or may not understand how to approach issues of sexual diversity. Offering training to teachers can foster their involvement as allies to support students and increase their level of comfort and expertise in handling such situations.

EMPOWERING EDUCATORS AS ALLIES AND AGENTS OF CHANGE

Educators often have the most direct influence on and access to young people in schools and can play a key role in shaping their values and attitudes. Empowering educators to support students in the classroom adds another protective dimension, charging the educators with the responsibility to diffuse homophobia when it emerges and serve as an ally to their students. Empowering educators as agents of changes enables them to take advantage of opportunities that arise to teach students about diversity and respect rather than confining those lessons to a particular curriculum. School administrators and authorities can bolster educators to assume these roles by communicating their support clearly and directly. They can also enable educators to contribute their ideas to the curriculum

POLICY CHANGES

Educators, parents, school administrators and students can come together to define and standardize clear values of diversity, safety, inclusion and support. Together, they can develop a policy framework that involves these core principles, among others:

- Homophobic abuse and harassment is not acceptable behavior and will not be tolerated
- Preventive action instead of reactive action
- Perpetrators will be dealt with appropriately
- Individuals who are bullied will receive support
- Incidents of bullying will be reported and monitored
- Educators are ultimately responsible for what happens in the classroom

SCHOOL CULTURE

Fostering a culture of respect and personal responsibility in the school can have positive outcomes. This can be created by stopping students when they engage in name calling and bullying and explaining why such actions are harmful. The school environment should encourage speaking out against bias, intolerance of discrimination, and responsible behavior.

SUPPORTIVE CURRICULUM

Building the skills and knowledge base that students need to combat homophobia can be supported by including the right curriculum. Comprehensive sexuality education that is based on human rights and respects the values of a democratic, pluralistic society is the most appropriate teaching tool. It includes ethical, biological, emotional, social, cultural, and gender aspects as well as topics related to the diversity of sexual orientations and identities, in accordance with the legal framework of each country, to promote respect for differences, reject any form of discrimination, also to foster responsible and informed decision making among young people.

Developing resilience should be a critical element of such curriculum. Resilience refers to the ability to adapt successfully despite risk and adversity. Especially during the period of adolescence, youth “acquire and consolidate skills, attitudes, values needed to be prepared for the transition into adulthood.”

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parents are often the first and most important teachers to young people and serve as a critical bridge for reinforcing the lessons and concepts taught in schools. Creating opportunities for parents to learn about how a school fosters a safe learning environments, addresses sexual diversity and combats homophobia draws parents in as allies. Without such an "open door" policy, parents may be confused about the reality of homophobic bullying and harassment in the school and may have misconceptions about the underlying values and attitudes being promoted through safe schools interventions.

Bullying and harassment may not occur in front of other students, educators or school administrators, decreasing the chance for an intervention. Students who have been targeted may feel shame or fear and may not seek help. Parents need to learn how to detect signs of abuse and bullying, and what the school policies are and whom to contact if their child or someone they know is being bullied.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Supporting student-led initiatives and activities can be a fundamental element in promoting safe schools that are free from homophobia. This might take the form of a gay-straight alliance which creates a safe space.

Students might also organize awareness campaigns or solidarity days to bring increased attention to homophobia and its consequences.

Students might develop a charter or set of guidelines that may have greater relevance and adherence because it was not produced by an outside body. They may feel a greater sense of ownership and be more actively involved in holding themselves and their peers accountable to the agreed upon behavior. For example, in the U.K., a council of secondary school students was given the task of drafting a charter against homophobic bullying for their school. The charter included the following points:

- Promote the self-esteem of all students through all aspects of school life
- Value other cultures and lifestyles – it's OK to be different
- Treat all people with respect regardless of sexuality
- Ensure equal rights for everyone
- Offer counseling/support around issues concerning sexuality
- Create more opportunities for discussion in school to raise awareness about homophobia and its effects
- Challenge name calling no matter what the nature of it
- Publish telephone "help lines" around school
- Punish those who use homophobic language

While these are some important examples, fundamental to such a list of possible agreements is that they originate from the students themselves.

ENGAGE POLICYMAKERS

While the Ministerial Declaration "Educating to Prevent" expresses political will at the highest level, the process of engaging policymakers at the state and local level requires active outreach and awareness-raising. Legislators and other government authorities play a critical role in establishing the legal frameworks for safe schools and the underlying principles of non-discrimination, safety and well-being. Parents, educators and school administrators can reach out to policymakers to ensure they understand the realities of homophobic bullying and harassment and survey the existing legal framework.

OTHER KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Looking beyond the "usual suspects" can lead to fruitful and strategic relationships: members of the health sector as well as the educational sector, community based organizations and NGOs, faith-based organizations and even the media. All these actors should play a key role in creating and preserving safe, inclusive, and healthy educational environments.

What is the Mexico City Ministerial Declaration?

The Mexico City Ministerial Declaration represents a partnership between Ministries of Education and Ministries of Health, marked by the establishment of joint planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and follow up, as well as facilitating involvement of other key sectors. It represents a synergy between Ministries of Health and Ministers of Education to develop and deliver the information, education and counseling needed to reverse the HIV/AIDS epidemic, promote healthy life styles through comprehensive sexuality education as well as sexual health related services.

GOAL: Reduce by 50% the number of adolescents and young people who are not covered by health services that address their sexual and reproductive health needs appropriately

GOAL: Reduce by 75% the number of schools that have failed to institutionalize comprehensive sex education

ADDITIONAL SOURCES AND WEBSITES

Safe Schools: Cultivating Respect

Information on ten ways that parents, families and friends can make schools safer for LGBT students.

<http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=1011>

K-12 Curricula and Lesson Plans

Free curricula and lesson plans to raise awareness on bullying and harassment to encourage a safe school environment

<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2461.html?state=tools&type=educator>

Safe Space Kit

A guide for educators on how to be an ally, support LGBT students and advocate for change in their schools.

<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/1641.html?state=tools&type=educator>

If language is one of the main forms in which we learn and reproduce a degrading treatment to the transgression of gender stereotypes, then it can also be a way for learning and putting in place new norms for social coexistence. We can make sure that our language does not reproduce negative judgments or those which view femininity in men as “deviations”. Let us rather seek pride and dignity in the different manifestations of the transgression of arbitrary norms that hide the true human nature.

-LUIS ORTIZ-HERNANDEZ, RESEARCH PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH CARE, METROPOLITAN AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY – XOCHIMILCO

THE TEXT OF THE *MEXICO CITY MINISTERIAL DECLARATION* CAN BE FOUND:

In Spanish at: <http://www.censida.salud.gob.mx/descargas/pdfs/declaracion.pdf>

In English at: http://data.unaids.org/pub/BaseDocument/2008/20080801_minsterdeclaration_en.pdf